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ABSTRACT

There are many ways to assess the effectiveness of school conflict resolution training (CRT) programs. Some methods require extensive resources, but others, conducted by CRT practitioners themselves, also provide useful information. This digest presents a framework for CRT evaluation by practitioners that enables them to reflect productively on their practice. To determine the effectiveness of their CRT programs, practitioners must address such issues as: what the program objectives are; what determines achievement of the objectives; whether practitioner observations, student self-reports, and reports by others about the students provide information on positive changes from CRT; why the CRT program succeeds; and why the CRT program fails. Useful assessment of a CRT program measures such student attributes as: knowledge of the basic concepts of constructive conflict resolution; orientation, attitudes, and emotional responses to conflict that facilitate constructive resolution; skills needed for constructive conflict resolution; and behavior in certain types of situations. There are many different ways to elicit information for assessment of CRT, including observation of actual behaviors in real conflict situations; interviews and questionnaires; diaries of students' daily experiences with conflict; and data from school records. Resources for practitioners doing their own assessments are included. (Contains 15 resources.) (SM)

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DIGEST

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PRACTITIONER ASSESSMENT OF CONFLICT RESOLUTION PROGRAMS

There are many ways to assess the effectiveness of school conflict resolution training (CRT) programs. Some methods require extensive resources, but others, conducted by CRT practitioners themselves, also provide useful information. This digest presents a framework for CRT evaluation by practitioners which enables them to reflect productively on their practice.

Assessment Questions

To determine the effectiveness of their CRT program, practitioners need answers to the following questions:

- What are the program objectives (i.e., establishment of a peaceful, orderly classroom, constructive student management of their conflicts, improvement of grades)?
- What determines achievement of these objectives (i.e., a decrease in fights, victimization, verbal abuse, hurt feelings, discrimination, disorder; an increase in the willingness of students to face problems openly and resolve conflicts cooperatively, better working and social relations)?
- Can practitioner observations, student self-reports, and reports by others about the students provide information on positive changes from CRT?
- If the CRT program appears successful, is it because of real improvement in the students' behavior; because of students' good CR skills prior to training; or because of an unrelated factor (i.e., increased maturity of the students, the introduction of some other change in the curriculum, school, or neighborhood)?
- If CRT seems to have failed, how can the causes be determined? If poor results are common, are they due to identifiable inadequacies in the CRT program; to inadequate training or support for successful program implementation; or to a countering influence in the school, families, or neighborhood? If poor results are not common, are there differences in the way successful teachers implement CRT, or do the differences result from differences in the student groups being taught?

What to Measure

The objective of most CRT programs is to enable students to initiate and develop a constructive process of resolution when in a conflict. Thus, useful assessment of a CRT program measures student attributes such as these:

Knowledge

Assessing this variable elicits student knowledge of the basic concepts of constructive conflict resolution and the typical steps involved in a mediation process.

Orientation, Attitudes, and Emotions

This assessment determines student acquisition of the orientation, attitudes, and emotional responses to conflict which facilitate constructive resolution: their development of a cooperative (win-win) rather that a competitive (win-lose) orientation to conflict, with positive rather than negative expectations about the CR processes and outcomes. Assessment might also cover the CRT program's effects on social attitudes such as alienation, trust, suspicion, ethnocentrism, and authoritarianism.

Skills

The ultimate measure of the effectiveness of a CRT program is whether the students acquire and use skills needed for constructive conflict resolution such as these:

- Ability to reduce tension; find "common ground" between oneself and the other; establish a friendly working relationship; and support, encourage, and enhance the other.
- Ability to reframe the conflict as a mutual problem to be resolved cooperatively.
- Effective and responsive mutual communication, and active listening to the other, which involve understanding the meaning and emotions of the communication.
- Perspective taking and role reversal, which involve empathetic understanding of one's own, and the other's, position and underlying needs, and the ability to differentiate between them.
- Ability to problem solve by diagnosing the nature of the conflict and generating feasible solutions.
- Personal impulse control (e.g., resistance to overreaction, anger, ethnocentrism, defensiveness), and the ability to respond to the other's similar emotions.

Behavior in Different Situations

People are sometimes more able to manage their conflicts successfully in certain types of situations than in others, with certain people, and about certain types of issues. Thus it is useful to know what is problematic for a student.

While it is likely that the knowledge acquired in CRT can be transferred to situations characterized by strong norms of cooperation and prosocial values, a transfer to a situation characterized by less socially constructive norms can make CR approaches difficult. Issues that threaten personal or important group identities, esteem, security, or survival are difficult to resolve, as are disputes with a long history of contentiousness. Conflicts over basic values, relative power, relative status, possession of limited resources vital to security, esteem, or identity are also difficult to resolve constructively unless the parties involved in the conflict are highly skilled and strongly committed to the CR process.

How to Measure

There are a number of different ways to elicit information for assessment of conflict resolution training:

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- ***Observation*** of actual behaviors in real conflict situations is probably the most persuasive form of data collection. Teachers in ongoing contact with their students can observe changes in conflict resolution behaviors in their classrooms. Teachers may also observe "simulated conflicts" by devising a conflict situation, assigning students to take a given role in it, and then observing their efforts at resolution.
- ***Interviews and questionnaires*** involve obtaining reports from the students about their own knowledge, attitudes, skills, and behavior in conflict situations. Teachers can also obtain reports from others who observe a student's behavior (e.g., fellow students, friends, parents, teachers, supervisors).
- ***Diaries*** in which a student records daily experiences with conflict can be valuable, especially if a framework or set of questions is provided as a guide.
- ***Data found in school records*** can also help determine whether violence, delinquency, vandalism, disciplinary cases, absenteeism or truancy, health complaints, depression, and neurotic symptoms have decreased; and whether school grades, voluntary actions to help the class or school, and cooperative activities among teachers have improved.

Resources

Some valuable references are available for practitioners doing their own assessments.

Learning Through Reflection

Marsick, V.J., & Sauquet, J. (2000). Learning through reflection. In M. Deutsch & P.T. Coleman, *The handbook of conflict resolution: Theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

An excellent chapter, and its reference list contains additional useful reading, such as:

Marsick, V.J., & Watkins, K.E. (1999). *Facilitating the learning organizations: Making learning count*. Brookfield, VT: Ashgate. (ED 437 518)

Mezirow, J.D. (1991). *Transformative dimensions of adult learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (ED 353 469)

Schon, D.A. (1987). *Educating the reflective practitioner: Toward a new design for teaching and learning in the professions*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (ED 295 518)

Research Methods

Judd, C.M., Smith, E.R., & Kidder, L.H. (1991). *Research methods in social relations* (6th ed.). Orlando, FL: Holt, Reinhart, & Winston.

A classic textbook on research methods with excellent chapters on all aspects of research, including interviewing, questionnaire construction, and observation methods.

Robinson, J.P., Shaver, P.R., & Wrightsman, L.S. (Eds.). (1991). *Measures of personality and social attitudes*. New York: Academic Press.

Contains descriptions and examples of widely employed measures of personality and social attitudes, some of which may be influenced by CRT.

Research Studies

Deutsch, M., & Coleman, P.T. (Eds.). (2000). *The handbook of conflict resolution: Theory and practice*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Contains measures for assessing the effects of CRT.

Bodine, R.J., & Crawford, D.K. (Eds.). (1998). *The handbook of conflict resolution education: A guide to building quality programs in schools*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass. (ED 414 389)

Presents a relevant summary of research findings in the editors' own chapter, "Research Findings on What Works."

Jones, T.S., & Kmitta, D. (Eds.). (2000). *Does it work? The case for conflict resolution education in our nation's schools*. Washington, DC: Conflict Resolution Education Network.

Reviews impacts on students, educators, diverse populations, and school and classroom climate.

Elliot, D.S., Hamburg, D.A., & Williams, K.R. (1998). *Violence in American schools*. Cambridge, U.K.: Cambridge University Press.

Reviews research on school violence prevention programs.

Sandy, S.V., & Boardman, S.K. (in press). The peaceful kids conflict resolution program. *International Journal of Conflict Management*.

Describes various ingenious measuring instruments for preschoolers, as well as measures for use with parents and day care staff. (Contact Dr. S.V. Sandy at the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, Box 53, Teachers College, Columbia University, NY, NY 10027.)

Johnson, D.W., & Johnson, R.T. (2000). *Teaching students to be peacemakers: Results of twelve years of research*. Unpublished paper. University of Minnesota, Minneapolis.

Describes a series of studies, including measures used with K-9 students. (Contact Professor David W. Johnson at the University of Minnesota, 60 Peik Hall, Minneapolis, MN, 55455.)

Aber, J.L., Brown, J.L., & Heinrich, C.C. (1999). *Teaching conflict resolution: An effective school-based approach to violence prevention*. New York: Columbia University, Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health, National Center for Children in Poverty. (ED 437 176)

Reports on systematic research, using very interesting measures, with children in elementary grades. (Contact Professor John L. Aber at the National Center For Children in Poverty, Joseph L. Mailman School of Public Health of Columbia University, New York, NY 10032.)

Jones, T.S. (1997). *Comprehensive peer mediation evaluation project: Preliminary final report*. Report submitted to the William and Flora Hewlitt Foundation and the Surdna Foundation.

Reports on extensive research, using a variety of well-developed measures, on students in elementary, middle, and high schools. (Contact Professor Tricia S. Jones at the Department of Communication Sciences, Temple University, Philadelphia, PA, 19122.)

Coleman, P.T., & Lim, Y. (in press). *A systematic approach to assessing the effects of collaborative negotiation training on individuals and systems*. New York: Teachers College, International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution.

Presents systematic questionnaires for evaluating CRT for use with adults who were trained and other instruments for use with people who know the trainees well, and can report on changes in the behavior of the trainees. (Contact Professor Peter Coleman at the International Center for Cooperation and Conflict Resolution, address above.)

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